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ABSTRACT

Presented in this document is a discussion of the need for an ongoing evaluation of the accuracy and adequacy of materials pertaining to American Indians in textbooks and reference books in use, or being produced for use, in the nation's schools. During this ongoing evaluation, to be done by a recognized permanent national committee of Indian scholars, the committee should work closely with textbook authors and publishers in preparation of all instructional materials about Indians intended for general as well as for local use, and the findings should be disseminated widely. Also, it is recommended that college courses such as The American Indian and Early European Contact, The American Indian in American History, The American Indian in American Life, and The Literary Heritage of the American Indian be developed. (LS)

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TEACHING THE ROLE OF THE INDIAN IN AMERICAN HISTORY AND UPGRADING CURRICULA

A Position Paper
Submitted to
Southwestern Cooperative Educational Laboratory

By
Rupert Costo

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TEACHING THE ROLE OF THE INDIAN IN AMERICAN HISTORY AND UPGRADING CURRICULA

* A Position Paper *

by Rupert Costo

The teaching of American History has been influenced, at best, by the philosophy of apologists for the dominant society. At worst, it has been dictated by efforts to continue the system of colonial suppression of Native languages, religions, traditions, and rights to their land.

In the first instance, the apologists for America's dominant structure have touted the concepts that the Indian did not truly own his land, that he be considered in the same light as the great trees, mountains and streams of the land - beautiful indeed! In the interests of "progress" the apologists have supported the philosophy that the Native must submit to assimilation, acculturation, and second class citizenship, if not in words then certainly in results. This is reflected in the philosophy of Frederick Jackson Turner, whose "Turner Thesis" expressed the position that American westward expansion was a necessary and progressive movement so that civilized man might take up and develop the "unoccupied and vacant land" of the country. There are many American historians who even today support the Turner thesis, and it "shows" in their production of textbooks for schoolroom use in American history, from elementary grade levels to the University.

That the land was not "vacant and unoccupied," but owned by distinct Native tribes, peoples, and nations, is even today denied by the majority of textbook-writing historians, and a good number of historiographers generally. That the nature of this ownership, possession, and occupancy of Indian land was different

from that of a western culture, is beside the point. So too is the nature of land ownership in many countries now enjoying the largesse of American financial aid.

In the second instance, the system of colonial suppression of the Native lifeways and rights to his land has resulted in a type of historiography which either omits the Indian from mention entirely, or describes the Native as utterly degraded, practicing various exotic and "strange" ritual religions that are anathema to "civilized" people, and treat the American Indian of today as a mere minority, one of many which are deserving of welfare programs. It is forgotten that once the Indian was the majority in the population of this land, and that only because of the humanity of Native religions and lifeways was European immigrant society placed in a position of majority population, domination in government, and hegemony in ideological concepts which embrace the dominant philosophy as "the most, the best of all possible worlds."

These philosophies result in the present situation, in which the role of the American Indian in American history in misinterpreted, falsified, and the Native is deprived not only of his land and rights, but of moral justice as well. Concepts have been made a part of textbook learning such as these: "culture" becomes "custom" when it describes the American Indian; "homes" become "huts'," "clothing" becomes "body covering." The Indian "roams" in his land, everybody else "travels." Instead of giving an accurate description of Native complex social relationships, it is stated that the Indian had a "primitive," or a "simple" culture. In the context of anthropology this designation has some scientific meaning. In the context of historiography, it is to diminish the culture and lifeways of the Native. Thus is the Indian denied his history in the development of the nation. Few if any books describe the thousands of

contributions of the Indian. Native philosophies and religions are never described at all, and when this is done, inaccuracy prevails. Such Native philosophies and religions however, are now being studied as examples of man's humanity to man. In one textbook, a so-called "friend" of the Native American makes this statement: "These people (Indians west of the Rockies) were bone-poor; they were primitive; they were dirty (who would waste water on washing?)" This author, whose book, titled "Indians," is widely used in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, states, concerning California Indians, that "Because of their diversity, these Indians are an ethnologist's delight; but because of their sedentary dullness, they aren't very interesting to the rest of us." These are only a few examples of falsification, villification, degradation, and outright slander of the Native Americans, which fill the textbooks and all other instructional materials. A complete and exhaustive study of this phenomenon in American historiography is contained in "Textbooks and the American Indian," published by the Indian Historian Press in 1970.

Teaching the role of the American Indian in American history is therefore one of correcting misinterpretations, wiping out falsifications, and replacing an ideology of apologistics with one of accuracy and scholarly objectivity. No scholar of the Indian world supports censorship. Let the historian write as he sees it. He has the right to be wrong in addressing the general publi.. But schoolbooks, instructional materials, have no right to be wrong.

The correction of existing textbooks and instructional materials is the work of years. The American Indian Historical Society has been active in textbook correction for six years. Publishers have exhibited a strong desire to "tell it like it is, like it was." This writer has agreed to act as one of the evaluators for the State of California in a coming adoption of books for 1971. He has received nearly 250 books for evaluation. These books are also

being submitted for adoption in other states. It is with utmost misgiving and horror that it must be reported the 1971 textbooks are worse than those formerly evaluated. Such questions (inquiry method) are asked of 8th grade students, in the interests of the learning process, as: "The Indian is abnormal. Why is he abnormal?" Inaccuracy abounds in nearly every textbook. A new series of social science books, designed for 7th and 8th graders, and edited by the renowned social scientist, Dr. Edwin Fenton, has played it safe, and in the entire work, the result of years of research, writing and authentication, the subject of which is American History, the Indian is not even mentioned.

First priority in the development of a system of teaching the role of the American Indian in American history is the production of new books and instructional materials, carefully authenticated, accurately written, exciting because they tell the truth, which is always more exciting than falsification. The Indian Historian Press, an American Indian educational publishing house, was founded because of this condition and for just this purpose. It is now engaged in the production of a body of accurate literature for the use of the educational community. It is recommended that every college, university, and teachers' organization begin to develop new and accurate interim materials for instructional use, until the time when new materials are published. At least a year is envisioned for producing the first 20 books which will help fill this enormous gap.

The approach to American history is, in the first place, incorrect and improper. Invariably, the approach is from the point of view of European cultures, European mores, and European lifeways. In some instances, a short chapter or paragraph is now being devoted to the Native in American history, in this manner: "The first inhabitants of America were the American Indians. They were here first. They are the First Americans." Thus, somebody's conscience is salved, those school districts beset by the criticism of Indian scholars can perhaps

be satisfied, and tokenism has again sprouted full grown. But considering the great body of inaccurate books, the student has been deprived of some of the richest and most fascinating parts of American history; he has been indoctrinated with the philosophy of the dominant society; and he has begun to learn a type of falsified history which must be unlearned before he can become a reasoning, objective human being free from prejudice and racism.

The development of instructional materials, including textbooks, thus presents an enormous task. When questioned by teachers as to books recommended for classroom use, there are not more than eight books which the American Indian Historical Society can indeed recommend, and these are generally written by anthropologists whose work must be adapted to other subject areas. Indeed a crisis of immense proportions now exists in American education so far as teaching the role of the American Indian in American history is concerned. Not alone is instructional material unavailable and practically nonexistent, but the major part of the teaching profession is unprepared to teach about the American Indian, having been themselves indoctrinated and educated in the dominant society's philosophy of historiography.

What then, can be done? No one person can improvise a blueprint to correct the situation. No one situation can be subjected to corrective measures of the same type or content. And furthermore, we are talking here of the entire educational system, each part of which requires special consideration, special types of materials, and different teaching methodology. We are talking about an entirely different type of content presentation and methodology when we consider elementary school teaching. Secondary school teaching is again a different matter. So too is the problem of a different kind and proportion on the college and university level. In addition, special attention must be given to instruction of teachers on a crash basis, and this means: instituting special seminars

for teachers on American Indian cultures and history, allowing a major in the department of education on American Indian history and cultures, preparation of special teachers' guides and other materials; re-working the entire curriculum, so that the role of the Indian is not segregated in one corner of the educational process variously titled "Native American Program," or "ethnic studies," Changes must be made in every department of the educational "system," specifically in anthropology, sociology, education, psychology, language (insofar as allowing English to be taught as a second language in Indian communities, and permitting Indian languages to be taken as a second language in other communities), history and literature - to name some of the subject areas affected. Native scholars, who have perhaps no formal education, should be enlisted in the educational system as teachers' aides with a possibility for advancement and with specialized training to make them expert in teaching methodology. Some of this is being attempted even now, but fails of the mark because of the preconceived attitudes of teachers, inadequate funding, and downgrading the Native experts.

The subject of curriculum development in teaching the role of the American Indian in American history has other most important aspects: teaching in the tribal or reservation community, and of teaching in the public school system. Curriculum for schools in the Indian community already has some type of experience, notably the Rough Rock Demonstration School, which has provided both good and uncertain examples. Curriculum for colleges and universities which have or are developing Indian studies programs have also provided much experience, very little of it of a positive nature. As a rule, these programs have become a patchwork sort of affair, in which course categories have been "lifted" from departments such as history and anthropology and inserted into the curriculum design of the Native American Studies program. This is unsatisfactory, and it has resulted because of the lack of curriculum guidance, and the failure

of instructional materials. It is the belief of this writer that no one program can be expected to change the present critical situation. Examples of some courses that could be devised are these: the American Indian and Early European Contact; the American Indian in American History; the American Indian in American Life (influence, contributions, religions, lifeways); the Philosophy and Religions of the American Indian; the Literary Heritage of the American Indian; Indian Psychological and Medical Practices and Relationship to the Modern Medical World. In New York State, there is now a course in the Seneca language, won through demonstrations of the Indian parents for better schooling for their children. Originally planned for the Seneca children, the course was offered to non-Indians. There were as many non-Indians who registered as there were Indians. Is it too much to expect that in New York State, the home of the Seneca, this language could become just as important and intellectually stimulating as the study of Greek, Latin, or French? It can happen, and it should.

I have merely indicated certain problems, and pointed out certain tentative objectives. But indeed the problem of curriculum design and development is understood by the American Indian Historical Society as one deserving of much more intensive study and scholarly care. The Society has therefore asked for and received "seed money" from the National Endowment for the Humanities, in the development of curriculum as to the role of the American Indian in American History. The program is now under way. Directors are Dr. Jeanette Henry (history), and Dr. Helen Redbird (education). Participants and curriculum development planning have been assigned to Indian scholars, among them: Bea Medicine and Dr. Edward P. Dozier, (anthropology); Hurley Parkhurst (soil science), Dr. N. Scott Momaday (literature); Richard West, Jr., (law); Dr. Dick West (art); Rupert Costo (American Indian Today).

These scholars will meet during the early part of January, and will meet again in a summary seminar in May, 1971. The final papers will be presented to the Second Convocation of American Indian Scholars which will be held in September, 1971. These will be discussed, changed if necessary, and then will be printed and made available to every college and university in the nation for adaptation or use. The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars, which met at Princeton University in March, 1970, provided ample proof that scholarship does indeed exist and is available among the Native Americans. This scholarship and expertise is ready to be put to use for the Native people of America, and for the educational community as a whole.

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